

Can You Hear God Now?

Your most important leadership role: discerning and obeying God's voice. Together.

by Ruth Haley Barton

A pastor told me that his church had outgrown their facility, so they were asking, "Will we add on to our facility, or will we start another church?"

But this was only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface, larger questions lurked: Is our leadership structure solid enough for this situation? Or will we burn ourselves out if we add a building campaign and more people and activities to our current structure?

Sensing the weight he was carrying, I asked,

"How are you going about answering these questions? Does your leadership team have a process for discerning God's will in these matters?"

Looking a bit disoriented, he shook his head. "But we always have a time of prayer at the beginning of our meetings," he said.

The heart of spiritual leadership

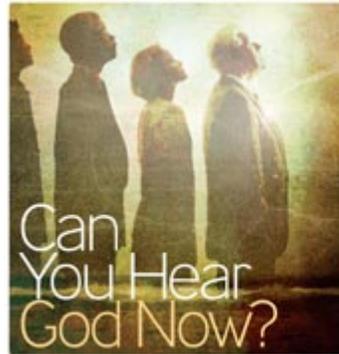
What is it that distinguishes spiritual leadership from other kinds of leadership?

At the heart of spiritual leadership is discernment—the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and activity of God both personally and in community.

The Israelite journey is really a story of ongoing discernment—learning to recognize the presence of God and then following that Presence wherever it went. For Moses as their leader, this involved entering into God's presence regularly, asking God what he should do, and then leading the people in that way. Moses' ability to trust God and listen and respond obediently to his instructions was so crucial to the Israelites' survival that the one time he failed to follow God's instruction fully, there were grave consequences (Num. 20: 10-13).

Unlike Moses, we don't get to talk with God face to face. We must listen deeply.

It is no wonder that when Moses recapped the Israelite journey, he emphasized how important discernment had been to the whole operation. He reminded the people of the time God told them to choose leaders to serve as judges under Moses and that the heart of their spiritual leadership was the ability to be wise and discerning (Deut. 1:13). Later he spoke about wisdom and discernment as defining characteristics that distinguished them from other nations.



A culture of discernment

Today, a spiritual leader is someone able to guide the discernment process so the community can sense God's desire for them and move forward on that basis.

Yet discernment does not take place in a vacuum, nor by accident. Spiritual community is the context for discernment, so the first move in cultivating a culture of discernment is to establish the leadership group as a community for discernment.

This means our life together is grounded in prayer and intentional spiritual practices, such as reading and reflecting on Scripture, silence, listening, worship and intercession, self-examination and confession.

This is the container for the discernment process. It is a means of creating space for God's activity in our lives. It is one way we can make ourselves available so that he can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. By practicing discernment in community, we open ourselves to the wisdom of God that is beyond human wisdom but is available to us when we ask for it.

Discernment is much easier said than done. Unlike Moses, we do not get to talk with God face to face or listen to his voice thundering on Mount Horeb. Instead, we must rely on the more subtle dynamics of the Holy Spirit's witnessing with the human spirit about things that are true (Rom. 8:16).

Discernment is not the endgame. The endgame is to actually do the will of God.

Discernment requires us to move beyond our reliance on cognition and intellectual hard work to a place of deep listening and response to the Spirit of God within and among us. It is one thing to rely on what feels like a subjective approach when it pertains to one's personal life; it feels much riskier when our decisions affect an entire congregation. Is there, then, a trustworthy process for actively seeking God in our corporate decisions?

Clarify the real questions

For a group of leaders, discernment is neither mechanical nor always linear. It is less a step-by-step procedure and more a creative mix of dynamic elements.

The first step toward entering a discernment process is to clarify the question for discernment. Not all questions warrant a full discernment process. Some questions, such as choosing a computer system, might be answered with a 15-minute, fact-based discussion. Whom to hire as key personnel, on the other hand, will wield much influence and should be a matter for group discernment.

And even when we think we know what the question is, there may be larger questions lurking underneath that hold even greater significance for us.

The question about a new building project, for instance, might deepen into questions about mission and values and whether a new building might or might not help us faithfully pursue the mission God has for this congregation.

What starts out as a meeting to set strategy might give way to the deeper question of whether we are pushing our own agenda or whether God is really opening up new opportunities.

What begins as a question about event scheduling raises far-reaching concerns about pace of life and whether we are serving and living together in such a way that creates space in our lives for loving God and others.

Thus discernment begins with listening for the deeper question: What is the real issue facing us?

Involve the right people

A prerequisite for community discernment is that the individuals involved are committed to the process of personal transformation. That means these individuals practice discernment in their own personal decision-making.

A common mistake is to think that a group of undiscerning individuals can meet in a church boardroom and all of a sudden become discerning! Many boards and elder groups are composed primarily of people who have been successful in business ventures but may have never experienced discernment.

If this is the case, we might need to slowly change the makeup of the leadership group, or we might need to provide teaching and training before embarking on a group discernment process.

Another aspect of involving the right people is to think outside the box about who else needs to be involved in the process. In addition to those who are already a part of the board, the staff, or the leadership team, we might consider: Who else has gifts of wisdom and discernment that we value? Who has information and experience that might help us? Who are the influencers that might be able to help communicate our decisions in an inviting way to the larger community when the time comes?

One other type of person you might consider is someone with experience and training in the practice of discernment. This could be a spiritual director, a discernmentarian (someone who guides the discernment process, much as a parliamentarian guides the process of majority rule), a convener, or a sage. While each of these terms has different nuances, they all apply to someone who does not have a vested interest in any particular outcome and is able to listen prayerfully, call for silence as needed, perhaps guide the process, or comment at different points regarding what they are hearing and how they think the Spirit might be moving the group.

Name your guiding values

Seeking discernment with others at the leadership level requires an extraordinary amount of safety in each other's presence, along with great clarity about what values govern the process. You might want to consider agreeing not to violate certain values for any reason, no matter how expedient it might seem. For example, our commitment to trustworthy relationships, to not violating confidence, to respecting the integrity and intuition of others on the team, to admitting each of us might be wrong and need the others to see a fuller picture.

We cannot just assume these values. We must talk about them and seek to live them with great vigor and intent. It might even be helpful to establish a written covenant with each other.

Even if such a covenant is already in place, it is good at the beginning of a discernment process—especially if there is disagreement or lots of vested interest—to go over the covenant

again and reaffirm that the group will be committed to each other and to the integrity of the relationships above all else.

In that context of community, leaders will be committed to telling the truth to the best of their ability, which leads us beyond the kind of maneuvering and posturing that often takes place in leadership settings.

Christians believe God works through all truth—even truth that seems as if it might slow us down or complicate matters or take us into uncharted territory—to bring forth the gift of discernment. Even when the truth is hard, we take great pains to affirm the courage that it takes for each one of us to bring God-given truth to the discernment process.

Spiritual leaders commit to honoring one another's deep reservations or resistance, trusting the Spirit of God in that person, and waiting for deeper understanding and unity. I have never seen a leadership group regret the decision to honor each other in this way. In fact, in leadership group situations I have been a part of, God has often used this principle to save us from ourselves!

What to pray for

A true discernment process begins with a commitment to pray without ceasing. This requires more than a perfunctory prayer at the beginning of a meeting. It involves several kinds of praying throughout the entire process.

Begin with a prayer of quiet trust. A different kind of spirit descends upon us when we enter into decision-making from this stance.

When we sense that the process is straying, that human dynamics are distracting us, that we are stuck, that we are applying nothing more than human effort to the decision we face, it can be helpful for the leader to call the group back to this prayer of quiet trust, along with some time for silence. This gives us the opportunity to shift back into a position of trust rather than completely relying on our human effort alone.

Then we need to pray for indifference. This is not apathy. Rather, it is praying that we would be indifferent to everything but the will of God. This means I am indifferent to matters of ego, prestige, organizational politics, personal advantage, personal comfort or favor, or even my own pet agenda. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a model of this. Her prayer "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your will" (Luke 1:37) is a wonderful expression of the kind of indifference we seek as a group of leaders.

Praying for indifference is not easy for us, because most times we enter into decision-making with strong opinions and more than a little self-interest. It takes time, for often a death to self is required before we can see God's will taking shape in our lives. Here we ask: what needs to die in me in order for the will of God to come forth in me and among us? In the discernment process, each person needs to do his or her own spiritual work around this question, and the group needs to be honest about it. Depending on the level of trust in the group, it might even be a good idea to ask, "How many are indifferent?" and then let each person talk about where they are with that question.

As challenging as this may be, it is time and energy well spent. If we do not reach the point of indifference (or if we are not at least honest about the fact that we are not indifferent), the discernment process becomes little more than a rigged election! Even the process of sharing

where we are on this question helps us loosen our grip on our own agenda and open ourselves to God's voice.

When we have reached a point of indifference, we are finally ready to pray for wisdom, which God promises to bestow generously when we ask (James 1:5). Indifference is an important prerequisite to the prayer for wisdom, because the wisdom of God is often the foolishness of this world.

Learn to listen, deeply

The discernment process requires a commitment to listen on many levels. First, we must listen deeply to the experience(s) that caused us to ask this question in the first place. When the New Testament believers were faced with the question of whether Gentiles must be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15), they entered a time of deep listening: to the conversion experience of the Gentiles, to the perspectives of the people with them, to the questions and debate of the Pharisees, to the accounts of signs and wonders from Paul and Barnabas, to James's exposition of Scripture that located their story in the larger Story of God's redemptive purposes.

Then, out of all that listening, James dared to state what he felt God was saying in it all: that the church would not impose any further burden on Gentile converts beyond the essentials of the faith. The listening process had been so thorough that when James summarized it succinctly, it was clear to all that the wisdom of God had been given. In a way, he functioned as a spiritual director who sat back and listened and then named what he heard God saying in the group.

As we see here, discernment involves listening with love and attention to our experiences, to each other, to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit deep within ourselves and others, to Scripture and Christian tradition, to pertinent facts and information, to those who will be affected most deeply by our decisions, to that place in us where God's Spirit witnesses with our spirit about those things that are true.

It is also important to listen to all voices. One way to make sure that all voices are being heard is for the convener to ask, after several people have spoken more than once, "Is there anyone who hasn't spoken yet who would like to say something that hasn't been said?" Sometimes the most important thing we need to hear is offered by the quietest person who needs encouragement to speak.

Finally, we enter back into silence and "listen within" when there have been too many words, or when the process gets stuck. Discernment requires self-awareness and other-awareness. In silence we can become aware of our emotions, thoughts, experiences, sins, and temptations so that we can see how these are affecting our participation. We may also be able to recognize dynamics in the group and name them in a way that is helpful.

Most of all, in the silence we can come back to a place of honoring each other and the complexity of the situation. Silence can help us cease striving and rest in God, bring calm to the chaos, give space for us to deal with our own inner dynamics, and help us listen to God. The words that follow such silence are often wiser and more insightful than what was said prior.

From discerning to doing

After all the listening has taken place, it is time to select an option that seems consistent with what God is doing among you. Discernment does not always come with as much clarity as it

did in Acts 15. When it's not clear, you might select an option or two, seek to improve upon those options so that they are the best they can possibly be, and then weigh them to see which one seems most consistent with what God is doing among you.

On which option does the Spirit seem to rest? What is the fruit of each option? Is there a Scripture that God brings to mind that is pertinent to the issue? Is there an option that enables us to do something before we do everything?

The Quakers encourage folks to "place each path near the heart" and see which one brings consolation or desolation. This takes a great deal of maturity, because matters of consolation and desolation are about more than surface emotion. We are talking about the inner dynamics that move us toward God and toward greater abandonment to his will and those that move us away from God and the life of faith.

Once the group has narrowed things down to one or two options, it is important to give time for individuals to seek inner confirmation, to allow people time apart from the group to become quiet in God's presence, to pray through the options, and to notice whether they are at peace with the decisions being made.

After some time—whether a few minutes, an hour, a day, or even a week—come back together and see what God has been saying in your quiet listening. If people are sensing similar things, then affirm that. If anyone is still experiencing questions or resistance, honor them by listening. Perhaps one element needs to be tweaked, or perhaps a larger adjustment needs to be made. Trust God to work through this person's hesitation to make the option you are choosing the wisest it can be.

Finally, agree together. As clarity emerges, it usually points toward one of the options as particularly graced by God with wisdom and truth. The group's quality of life together and sense of unity is as important as the decision itself. One Quaker leader put it like this: "Unity is the fundamental marker that God's direction has been discerned."

Then we rest in God, thanking him for his presence with us and for the gift of discernment as it has been given.

But discernment is not the endgame. The endgame is to actually do the will of God. Now is the time to move forward with confidence that "the one who has called you will be faithful to bring it to pass."

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